BUILDING BETTER STREETS with CMABS

BY JULIE LEAH

Picture of the board during our retreat at Donald Dungan library in Costa Mesa

For the past five years, the Costa Mesa Alliance for Better Streets (CMABS) aims to make our streets safer, more comfortable, and more inviting for the entire community. Their mission is to "imagine, inspire, and realize a more humane use of our streets as public spaces." This vision includes advocating for practical changes, such as installing crosswalks in front of churches, adding bicycle lanes, and speaking out at City Hall to promote street improvements.

Jenn Tanaka, Eastside resident and a board member of CMABS, shared, "We love to challenge the City's Public Works department to put as much care into street design as they would when creating a playground or public building."

Tanaka has been actively involved with CMABS for nearly three years. Reflecting on her motivation, she said, "Like many people, I was deeply moved by the drastic impacts the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns had on our neighborhood. That experience was a wake-up call, highlighting that our local parks and streets—lifeboats during a period of anxiety and isolation—were in desperate need of attention."

She learned about CMABS from one of its founders, Russell Toler, whom she knew through their shared church. "Once he told me about CMABS and the work it wanted to do, I was hooked," she explained.

While the board does not have formal roles, Tanaka is responsible for writing public comments and letters to the City Council and other governmental agencies, and helping produce and distribute the CMABS semi-weekly newsletter, which covers current transportation news and events in the city.

Examples of CMABS' Community Involvement

CMABS members are actively engaged in community advocacy. They frequently participate in City Council and Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) meetings, write public comments, and publish opinion pieces on transportation issues. "We love to participate in community events to raise awareness about active transportation," Tanaka explained. "For example, we distributed free bicycle helmets at the 'Back to School Fresh' event in Shalimar Park in Westside Costa Mesa. We've handed out thousands of bicycle lights at major intersections to keep cyclists safe and visible, and we recently joined the Love Costa Mesa event, where we collected hundreds of handwritten thank-you letters to deliver to our school crossing guards across the city."

Finding Inspiration in Urban Visionaries

Tanaka draws inspiration from the work of Jane Jacobs, whose book, *"The Death and Life of Great American Cities,"* is a seminal work in urban policy and planning. "Jacobs was just a citizen journalist with a brilliant mind and a keen eye for detail. Her observations about how cities function challenged the centralized, hyper-rational city planning establishment of her time, and we are still wrestling with her ideas today," Tanaka said.

Recent Successes and Future Goals

Tanaka emphasized that success for CMABS means changing how residents perceive their streets. "We feel successful when residents start to see their streets as more than just pavement for cars," she said.

Recently, the City hired a full-time Active Transportation Coordinator as part of its Public Works staff—a move Tanaka believes is directly related to the organization's advocacy efforts. "I believe this has directly contributed to the city undertaking ambitious pedestrian and bicycle improvements," she added.

A Message to the Community

At CMABS, the words of Dr. Seuss from *The Lorax* resonate deeply: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Tanaka stressed, "Positive change in our community must be driven by passionate residents. Thankfully, we have many passionate residents!"

"Visit cmabs.org throughout the campaign season," Tanaka urged. "This year is especially important for Eastside Costa Mesa because the district that includes most of the neighborhood is on the ballot.

Visit cmabs.org and subscribe to the newsletter to learn about community meetings and events like CMABS's weekly bicycle rides.